

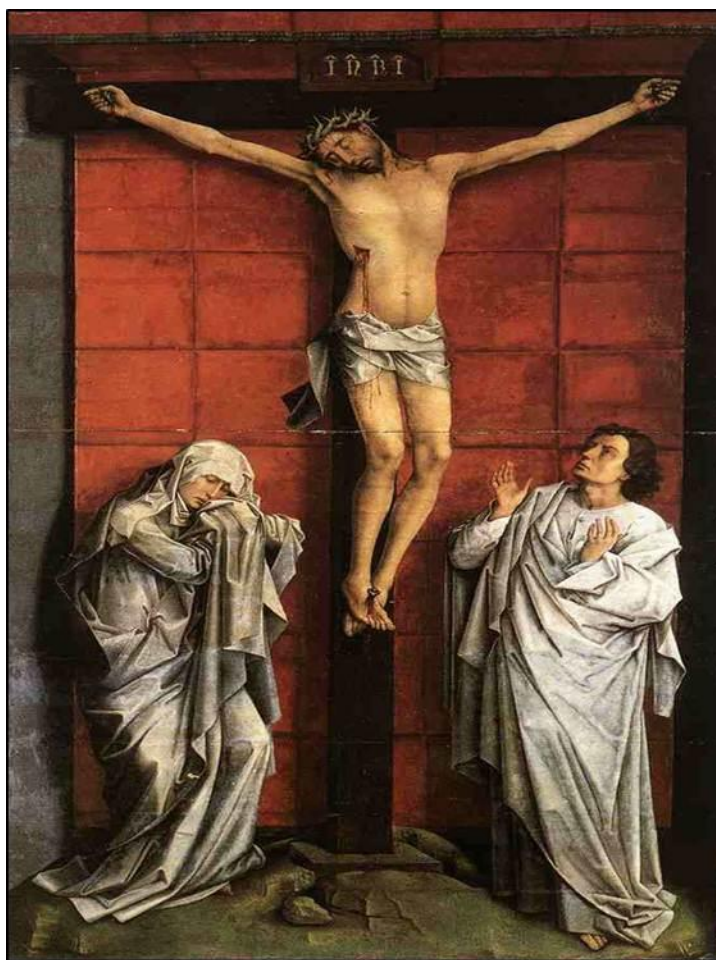


Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Doctrinal Catechesis Session
Mary Birmingham

THE CROSS OF CHRIST



English: Christ on the Cross with Mary and St John, Rogier van der Weyden, 1460. Public domain. The icon can be found on the website Wikimedia Commons. The icon is not copyrighted and thus may be reproduced and copies may be given to the participant.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening prayer

- Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.
- Option 2: Use the prayer below.

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you Lord as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.



Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session. Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that is best suited for your particular group.



Read the connecting statement

to draw the line between this week's liturgy and this chosen doctrinal theme.

This connecting statement is found in the **Breaking Open the Word** worksheet for this week.

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Version 2.0 reflects all recent revisions in
the Roman Missal.

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Censor Liborum

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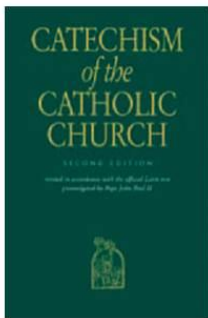


Sharing Human Experience

Catechist leads participants in a small group sharing exercise. Break into small groups (three or four). Remind participants to make time for all in the group to respond.

- ▶ We see people in the world wearing a cross for reasons other than identification with Christ.
- ▶ What does the generic use of the cross evoke in you when you see it out in the world?

Catechist takes two or three moments to use their responses to launch into a discussion about the cross of Jesus Christ.



Sharing Catholic Doctrine

Drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Refer to articles 604-623

Catechist begins with these points:

- ▶ Jesus was given the death penalty.
- ▶ Jesus was crucified. Crucifixion is not a means of execution today.
- ▶ We have no natural concept of cross apart from what has come to us from religious sources.
- ▶ However, the cross is used in our culture as a sign of adornment with little or no meaning attached to it. Some have made a mockery of it by the way it is used in the counter-cultural strata of today's society.
- ▶ The word *cross* has often been associated with a general understanding of suffering in our culture. "That poor woman has a cross to bear." The term *cross* is somewhat universally understood to mean the trials in one's life.

Catechist leads brief discussion. First break into dyads, (groups of two) then engage in a larger discussion.

- ▶ Name a time in your life when you suffered for doing the right thing, or for helping or reaching out to another person?
- ▶ What did that experience teach you about suffering that benefit others?

Catechist continues:

- ▶ Even though the cross is an object of torture, disgrace, and dishonor, it is the Christian symbol of hope and salvation par excellence.
- ▶ Theology of the cross is synonymous with Catholic theology of the paschal mystery (which we understand to mean the life, mission, passion, death, and resurrection, ascension of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit).
- ▶ Just as we are called to participate in the paschal mystery, so too are we called to participate in the cross of Christ as it is an essential element of the paschal mystery.
- ▶ Christ had to pass through the cross before the joy of the resurrection.
- ▶ Every liturgy begins with people in the assembly signing themselves with the sign of the cross, the sign of Christian and Catholic identity. We gather in the shadow of the cross.
- ▶ Every liturgy makes present the sacrifice of the cross and leads us from there to the empty tomb.
- ▶ Every Christian is exhorted to take up his or her cross and follow Christ. “Apart from the cross, there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven” (St. Rose of Lima, cf. P. Hansen, *Vita mirabilis* [Louvain, 1668]).

The cross as a liturgical symbol

- ▶ Christians are formed by the sign of the cross, by the cross as symbol.
- ▶ Every liturgy and every sacrament celebrates the paschal mystery of Christ, which places the cross front and center of every liturgical celebration.
- ▶ We participate in Jesus’ cross every time we gather in faith under its umbrella.
- ▶ The Eucharist makes present the paschal mystery; it is a living memorial of Christ’s saving death and resurrection from the dead.
- ▶ Every liturgical gathering begins with the sign of our redemption. Gathered under the banner of the cross, we are given our identity. We are people of the cross.
- ▶ Every catechumen and every newly baptized person is signed with the sign of salvation.
- ▶ The sign of the cross makes present God’s gift of salvation given to us through Christ’s atoning, redemptive sacrifice.
- ▶ Catholics make the sign of the cross every time they enter a church.
- ▶ The cross is especially honored and venerated in the liturgies of Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and the Feast of the Most Holy Cross.
- ▶ The seven weeks of honor is an extended meditation on the saving effects of the cross and subsequent resurrection.
- ▶ We journey through Christ’s life throughout the liturgical year. Each day presents a new challenge and invitation to embrace the cross and live by its power.
- ▶ The cross is a primary symbol used in every liturgy, blessing, ritual, sacrament, and sacramental of the Church.

- ▶ The cross simply could not be understood in Jesus' time. It was a sign of horror and disgrace. No one could fathom it as a sign of God's saving power. For Jesus' contemporaries, to think of the cross as an instrument of salvation would be paramount to modern culture thinking the electric chair is similarly worthy of honor and reverence.
- ▶ Ultimately, the cross is the sign of our redemption in which Christ conquered sin and death once and for all.



Sharing Faith

Catechist leads brief discussion using the points below. If needed, break into dyads (groups of two), then engage in a larger discussion. Catechist begins by sharing the story in Appendix #1 or a similar story in order to launch the discussion.

- ▶ The cross was as much an object of shame in Jesus' day as the electric chair is today. On Holy Thursday we sing, "We shall glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Imagine if we were to say: "You shall glory in the electric chair of our Lord Jesus Christ." That is how absurd the cross was to Jesus' followers, yet it was transformed into a sign of salvation.
- ▶ How would it make you feel if we were to proclaim: "We shall glory in the electric chair of our Lord?"
- ▶ What would that evoke in you?

The cross in sacred Scripture

- ▶ The Old Testament does not refer to the cross.
- ▶ The Greeks did not use crucifixion as a means of execution. Even though the Romans used crucifixion, Roman citizens were never crucified. It was reserved for traitors, insurrectionists, and people charged with capital crimes.
- ▶ Jesus anticipated his death on the cross. He challenged his followers to embrace the cross in their lives, to carry their cross, and follow him.
- ▶ To carry one's cross meant that one was to practice self-denial or kenosis, an outpouring of oneself.
- ▶ The only way to gain one's life is to lose it in the self-emptying act of carrying one's cross.
- ▶ Disciples are called to give up everything, to lose it all, in service of the reign of God.

Catechist leads brief discussion. First break into dyads (groups of two), then engage in a larger discussion.

- ▶ What way, if any, are you able to relate to what Jesus asked of his disciples?
- ▶ Have you ever denied yourself (or sacrificed yourself) for the sake of good or for the sake of others?
- ▶ What did you learn from the experience? What is the value in pouring yourself out—giving up everything—for another person or the sake of good?

St Paul's theology of the cross

- ▶ One of St. Paul's greatest legacies to the Church is his theology of the cross.
- ▶ Paul taught that while the cross was a disgusting, degrading symbol for God-loving Jews, an incredible stumbling block and very difficult to overcome, it was nevertheless the greatest sign of salvation for the world. Jews understood the cross as a sign of God's displeasure, not a sign of God's saving love. God would never allow a favored child to endure such an unclean, bloody death. The cross was an scandal to Jews (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2).
- ▶ Yet the greatest paradox in human history is that all people are saved who believe in its power!
- ▶ The Old Testament demanded circumcision as a sign of faith, trust, and the abandoning of a person's will to God.
- ▶ Paul insists that circumcision was rendered meaningless by the sign of the cross; the cross replaced the need for it.
- ▶ The cross is the ultimate sign of the covenant God forged with his people. It is the heart of the new covenant (Gal. 6:14).
- ▶ Paul insists that the cross brings people together and unites us in faith. Jews and Gentiles gather under its shadow.
- ▶ Jesus nailed the sins of the world to the wood of this horrific instrument of torture, thus saving humankind from certain destruction.
- ▶ Jesus became the saving victim of human sin (Col. 2:14).
- ▶ Jesus freely offered his life so that having died once, the entire world was saved.

Church doctrine and the cross

- ▶ Our Catholic Catechism insists that the cross symbolizes the unique sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the world (CCC, 614).
- ▶ Christ took unto himself the sins of the world.
- ▶ The cross is an initiation symbol as it incorporates us into the life of Jesus.
- ▶ Catechumens are signed over their entire person with the sign of the cross as a commitment on their part to embrace it, live it, and commit to forge ahead toward full initiation as they celebrate a rite of acceptance, the first step in their journey toward full initiation.
- ▶ The sacraments of initiation incorporate us fully into the mystery of Christ's death. St. Paul said, "Are you not aware that you who are baptized into Christ Jesus are baptized into his death" (Rom. 6)? Baptism and the fullness of the sacraments of initiation incorporate us into his suffering, death, and resurrection.
- ▶ In the sacrament of baptism, sin is buried, and we are raised to new life in Christ.

- ▶ Confirmation seals us with the Spirit of God. We are branded with the sign of the cross, permanently adhered to our soul and spirit. It is emblazoned on our hearts.
- ▶ Eucharist is the ultimate sharing in Christ's death and resurrection. We feast on the broken body of Christ and the cup of his blood.
- ▶ We take, bless, break, and share his body and we drink his blood. In so doing, we share the fullness of his crucified and resurrected life.
- ▶ In so doing, we too are taken, blessed, broken, and shared. Our life is poured out for others. We share in the ongoing redemption of the world.

Our participation in the cross of Christ

- ▶ The Christian community is heir to the salvation won by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.
- ▶ We are to follow the example of Christ as he hung from that tree. We are to live the gospel, and we are to share it. We are to die for it and empty ourselves for the sake of sin in the world.
- ▶ In so doing, we participate in the ongoing redemption that continues in the world. Yes, Jesus died once for all, but his saving work continues. We are participants in that work.
- ▶ What a gift we have been given!
- ▶ When accept our own suffering for the sake of others, for the sake of those who are lost and who cannot find their way, the suffering of our lives is given abundant meaning. It has redemptive value (CCC: 618).
- ▶ Salvation cannot be earned. We are heirs to Jesus' selfless act of love.
- ▶ The cross is a Jesus' supreme act of love in which human history is fulfilled.

(Material based on *Word and Worship Workbook*, Years A, B and C, Mary Birmingham, Easter Triduum, Symbol of the Cross, Mary Birmingham.)



Sharing Faith

The catechist invites participants deeper into the mystery of the cross. Choose among the following.

- ✓ Catechist shares a personal story of embracing the cross for the sake of the gospel or for the sake of others.
- ✓ Catechist may share one or more of the stories in the appendix. Appendix, 2, 3, or 4.
- ✓ Catechist shares a brief story of someone who gave their life so others might live such as Maximilian Kolbe in a Nazi concentration camp or another saint/martyr of the Church.
- ✓ Catechist may invite a parishioner to come and share a similar paschal story.



Community Connections

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions.

- ▶ In what way does the cross of Christ speak to your life right now?
- ▶ In what way are you invited to embrace it more fully?
- ▶ What are the obstacles that keep you from fully embracing the cross in your life at this time?
- ▶ Is there resistance within you? What needs to happen for you to overcome the obstacles and the resistance?
- ▶ What is your stumbling block in carrying the cross?

Liturgy, Scripture, and doctrine challenge us to transform our lives so that we can go out and help transform the world.

Catechist informs the group of any parish activity and makes arrangements of group participation. What is taking place in the parish community this week/season that would challenge us to participate in the cross of Christ?

- ✓ For example: “Our social concerns center provides, food, clothing and household needs to the poor in our area. They are looking for volunteers to help at the center. Many of the clients are beaten down by life. More than your money or your help with clothing and food, they need the gift of your time. Are you willing to serve them dinner and spend time offering them companionship and consolation? If so, let us meet this week at the center.”



Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following challenge by sharing with one other person.

- ▶ In what way does this teaching on the cross of Christ challenge you and the Christian community?
- ▶ In what way does today's session invite change in your life?
- ▶ When you embrace the cross of Christ, he invites you to be transformed by its power. What is the greatest need for transformation in your life right now?
- ▶ If Christ died for one of your sins, what sin causes him the greatest sadness?
- ▶ What are you willing to do about it?

Journal

- ▶ Questions for your journal throughout the week: Continue to reflect on the questions above. When you embrace the cross of Christ, he invites you to be transformed by its power. What is the greatest need for transformation in your life right now?
- ▶ If Christ died for one of your sins, what sin causes him the greatest sadness? What are you willing to do about it?



Closing Prayer

Leader: Please stand.

Let us remember one another in prayer this week, but let us now offer our prayer of intercession before God.

- ✓ Lord God, we pray for all of our catechumens and candidates that as they continue to embrace your cross they may be given the strength to persevere in all things. We pray to the Lord.
(Add your own intentions.)

Venerating the Cross

The Catholic Church has a tradition in which people come forward to honor the cross on Good Friday, the premier celebration of Jesus' passion and death.

Take one moment to gaze upon the picture of the cross that each person has been given. Take it home with you. Use it in your prayer. Reflect on its mystery. Make it a part of your daily prayer life. Reflect on the power of the cross to continue to save you.

Catechist invites a moment of silent reflection and then continues in these or similar words:

We honor the cross by either kissing the cross or bowing our heads before it. As I bring the cross to you, I invite you to similarly honor (another word we use for honor is venerate) the cross that you committed to carry when you said "Yes" to Christianity.

Let us pray.

We praise you and worship you Lord Jesus Christ.

We honor the symbol of the cross.

We praise you for your passion, death, and resurrection.

Through the gift of your cross, you brought joy to the world.

Consider the wood of the cross upon which hung the Savior of the world.

Let us give due honor and praise to Christ as we honor his cross.

Catechist takes the cross to each person. If this is a catechumenal session, move to sponsors first so they can demonstrate bowing before the cross or kissing the cross. Quietly alert several of them before the session that you will be asking them to model the ritual action.

Blessing

God of all compassion and mercy,
You gifted us with a perfect example of self-sacrificing love,
the gift of your Son, Jesus the Christ.
Strengthen your people to embrace his cross in their lives
and thus receive eternal peace and blessing.

All respond, "Amen."

You teach us that through your Son's passion and death
he broke the chains of death forever.
May God gift your children gathered here today with everlasting life.

Amen.

Your Son humbled himself for our sakes.
Fortify your people to follow his example
so that embracing the cross in their lives
they will share in his resurrection.

Amen.

Let us bless the Lord...
+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Before we go in the peace of Christ to live the cross in our everyday lives,
let us offer one another the sign of Christ's peace.

Appendix

1. WOMAN BEING RECEIVED INTO THE CHURCH

A young woman was preparing to be received into full Catholic communion. When we shared the question with the group regarding the phrase, “We shall glory in the electric chair of our Lord Jesus Christ” and what that evoked in them, this woman began to weep. She shared how she was studying to pass her bar exam. She dreamed of being a prosecutor. Yet all she could think today was that Jesus died at the hands of a prosecutor who put an innocent man to death. Never before had she considered the other side of the death penalty issue. Her world, the world she planned, was beginning to crumble.

This began a discussion about the death penalty. We shared with the group how Jesus was against the death penalty. It is simply not compatible with the Christian way of life. In John 8, Jesus was asked to weigh in on an execution in progress. There was no question of the defendant’s guilt or that the offense was a minor infraction. Neither of those things was the issue in this story. Jesus did not ignore the situation at hand or say it was a necessary evil and walk away or that it was a deterrent to crime or that it was an approved practice in the Old Testament. No. Jesus challenged the crowd. He told them that the one who is without sin should cast the first stone. None of them had the moral authority to execute anyone even in the face of a human law that allowed it.

She told us that this was the first time in her life that she was truly challenged by her faith. She reminded us that as a prosecutor she would have to seek the death penalty. She had always been comfortable with that proposition until this session. When she realized that Jesus was a victim of the death penalty, that he was an innocent victim, the weight of that responsibility came crashing down upon her. What if I were to ever put an innocent person to death? She was horrified at the thought. The power of the cross shook her to the core. She began to question her life’s career choice. What would she do? How could I seek the death penalty when my faith whose primary symbol, the cross, is itself an instrument of execution?

The cross constantly invites transformation. We cannot be seriously touched by its power and not be moved by it. The cross has the power to change lives, to heal addiction, to mend broken relationships, to change one’s career path forever. The next step in this woman’s conversion process will perhaps be to regard all life as sacred, not just innocent life. We must never take the power of the cross for granted.

2. STORY OF WOMAN WHO TOOK IN A CANCER PATIENT

A new Catholic took her participation in the cross so seriously that when she met a homeless woman on the street who suffered from end-stage breast cancer, she embraced her and brought her to her home. The homeless woman suffered from lesions all over her body. She lacked any hygiene; she was filthy, disgusting to look at and had no family or friends to minister to her in her dying days.

This wonderful woman took the homeless woman into her home against the strenuous objections of her adult children. She nursed the woman unto death. She ministered to her sores; she held her in the last hours of life. She literally gave herself up for this woman, for her sake, for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of participating in the sacrifice and redemption of the cross of Christ and for the sake of a woman in whom she saw the face of Christ.

3. STORY OF THE SACRIFICE OF A FAMILY

The daughter of a wonderful Catholic family announced to her family that she was pregnant with twins and that her boyfriend told her to have an abortion. He wanted nothing to do with the babies or the responsibility. The girl’s mother and father were heading into the later years of life and the joy, serenity, and much-anticipated dreams of the retirement years to come. Their daughter was hinting that her only option was to have an abortion. She had no insurance, no doctors, no visible means of support, and no future options. The parents, at great sacrifice to them, made it possible for these precious babies to be born into a loving nurturing family and home.

It would have been far easier to agree to the abortion. Their lives were interrupted and disrupted. Yet this family's belief in life; their belief in the need to sacrifice for their daughter; their belief that God would see them through the ordeal sustained them. As a result, today two precious babies are thriving and bringing much joy to their family.

These parents are a witness to the power of self-sacrificing love; not only did they sacrifice and witness to their daughter, but also to the world. The daughter's mother has given up all her life's plans, she has given up everything, in order to take care of the children so her daughter can finish school and forge a future life for herself and her twins. She does it without a grumble!

4. STORY OF HOMELESS MAN

God has always called our family to reach out to the homeless on the street. One Thanksgiving many years ago, we invited a man to come to our house for dinner. We felt blessed by his presence. It was a tremendous learning experience for our children. As adult children, they too now have deep concern for the homeless, poor, and oppressed.

However, as a result of our invitation, we all contracted scabies—the skin condition associated with living on the streets. Our hug goodbye to him invited the critters to jump ship and find new hosts. The experience was a reminder of what people on the streets have to deal with each and every day. It is also a reminder that doing the right thing, a good thing, sometimes brings hardship and suffering. It is a small price to pay!

5. STORY OF THE YOUNG MAN WHO GAVE HIS KIDNEY

A made-for-TV movie told the true story of a young man who was a gifted athlete. He had a promising career ahead of him. Professional leagues were vying to offer him contracts. His grandmother was dying of kidney failure and needed a kidney. This young man's kidney matched his grandmother's kidney. Rather than accept a major league contract and pursue his life-long dream, he offered his kidney to his grandmother so she could live. He sacrificed his dreams for another person.

Handout on the Cross

- ▶ Jesus was given the death penalty.
- ▶ Jesus was crucified. Crucifixion is not a means of execution today.
- ▶ We have no natural concept of cross apart from what has come to us from religious sources.
- ▶ However, the cross is used in our culture as a sign of adornment with little or no meaning attached to it. Some have made a mockery of it by the way it is used in the counter-cultural strata of today's society.
- ▶ The word *cross* has often been associated with a general understanding of suffering in our culture. "That poor woman has a cross to bear." The term *cross* is somewhat universally understood to mean the trials in one's life.
- ▶ Even though the cross is an object of torture, disgrace, and dishonor, it is the Christian symbol of hope and salvation par excellence.
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Good Friday, and the Feast of the Most Holy Cross.

- ▶ The seven weeks of honor is an extended meditation on the saving effects of the cross and subsequent resurrection.
- ▶ We journey through Christ's life throughout the liturgical year. Each day presents a new challenge and invitation to embrace the cross and live by its power.
- ▶ The cross is a primary symbol used in every liturgy, blessing, ritual, sacrament, and sacramental of the Church.
- ▶ The cross simply could not be understood in Jesus' time. It was a sign of horror and disgrace. No one could fathom it as a sign of God's saving power. For Jesus' contemporaries, to think of the cross as an instrument of salvation would be paramount to modern culture thinking the electric chair is similarly worthy of honor and reverence.
- ▶ Ultimately, the cross is the sign of our redemption in which Christ conquered sin and death once and for all.

St Paul's theology of the cross

- ▶ One of St. Paul's greatest legacies to the Church is his theology of the cross.
- ▶ Paul taught that while the cross was a disgusting, degrading symbol for God-loving Jews, an incredible stumbling block and very difficult to overcome, it was nevertheless the greatest sign of salvation for the world. Jews understood the cross as a sign of God's displeasure, not a sign of God's saving love. God would never allow a favored child to endure such an unclean, bloody death. The cross was an scandal to Jews (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2).
- ▶ Yet the greatest paradox in human history is that all people are saved who believe in its power!
- ▶ The Old Testament demanded circumcision as a sign of faith, trust, and the abandoning of a person's will to God.
- ▶ Paul insists that circumcision was rendered meaningless by the sign of the cross; the cross replaced the need for it.
- ▶ The cross is the ultimate sign of the covenant God forged with his people. It is the heart of the new covenant (Gal. 66:14).
- ▶ Paul insists that the cross brings people together and unites us in faith. Jews and Gentiles gather under its shadow.
- ▶ Jesus nailed the sins of the world to the wood of this horrific instrument of torture, thus saving humankind from certain destruction.
- ▶ Jesus became the saving victim of human sin (Col. 2:14).
- ▶ Jesus freely offered his life so that having died once, the entire world was saved.

Church doctrine and the cross

- ▶ Our Catholic Catechism insists that the cross symbolizes the unique sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the world (CCC, 614).
- ▶ Christ took unto himself the sins of the world.
- ▶ The cross is an initiation symbol as it incorporates us into the life of Jesus.
- ▶ Catechumens are signed over their entire person with the sign of the cross as a

commitment on their part to embrace it, live it, and commit to forge ahead toward full initiation as they celebrate a rite of acceptance, the first step in their journey toward full initiation.

- ▶ The sacraments of initiation incorporate us fully into the mystery of Christ's death. St. Paul said, "Are you not aware that you who are baptized into Christ Jesus are baptized into his death" (Rom. 6)? Baptism and the fullness of the sacraments of initiation incorporate us into his suffering, death, and resurrection.
- ▶ In the sacrament of baptism, sin is buried, and we are raised to new life in Christ.
- ▶ Confirmation seals us with the Spirit of God. We are branded with the sign of the cross, permanently adhered to our soul and spirit. It is emblazoned on our hearts.
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Our participation in the cross of Christ

- ▶ The Christian community is heir to the salvation won by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.
- ▶ We are to follow the example of Christ as he hung from that tree. We are to live the gospel, and we are to share it. We are to die for it and empty ourselves for the sake of sin in the world.
- ▶ In so doing, we participate in the ongoing redemption that continues in the world. Yes, Jesus died once for all, but his saving work continues. We are participants in that work.
- ▶ What a gift we have been given!
- ▶ When accept our own suffering for the sake of others, for the sake of those who are lost and who cannot find their way, the suffering of our lives is given abundant meaning. It has redemptive value (CCC: 618).
- ▶ Salvation cannot be earned. We are heirs to Jesus' selfless act of love.
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